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Strikes and Class Consciousness in the Early Work of Richard Hyman

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Abstract

This article reviews the writings of Richard Hyman analyzing strikes during the militancy of the 1970s. It focuses on his central concern with the relationship between industrial action and class consciousness, a perennial issue in Marxist theory. It sets this discussion in Hyman's examination of contemporary trade unionism and his membership of a small revolutionary group, the International Socialists. The development of his thinking from economism and rank and fileism towards understanding the social gestation of consciousness and his ultimate conviction that strikes possess no necessary connection with radicalization and even in revolutionary situations are subordinate to political action is explored and assessed. The article concludes with consideration of related literature and reflections on socialists and strikes in contemporary Britain.

Keywords

Strikes, class consciousness, unions, shop stewards, International Socialists.

I first met Richard Hyman in the spring of 1970. Together with Hugh Clegg he interviewed me for a place on the M.A. in Industrial Relations at the University of Warwick. The militancy of the period was moving towards its zenith. 'In Place of Strife' had been interred, strikes were an everyday occurrence, Harold Wilson's incomes policy was on the rocks and the Heath government was on the horizon. Still in his late twenties, Richard was already an important member of the industrial relations community at Warwick. Under the leadership of Clegg it was evolving an effective balance between teaching and research, informality and rigorous standards.

Remarkable as it seems today, Richard was largely unpublished, although his history of the Workers Union was in the press and over the following academic year the ideas that informed his publications of the 1970s were expounded and discussed in

his lively classes.¹ Never a disciple of oratorical technique, he was a strong character and his enthusiasm combined with patience and insistence on dialogue to make him a good teacher. He gnawed away at problems exposing their complexities. He provided students some of whom were perhaps impatient with his nuanced exposition and open-ended conclusions with a demonstration of how an engaged scholarly mind worked. Like his writing his teaching affirmed that commitment implied questioning and rethinking, if it was not to descend into dogma. He expressed that commitment in his dedication to developing industrial relations as a field of study and in his membership of the International Socialists (IS).

As he saw it, academic industrial relations debilitatingly assumed the economic, social and political context as given. It had discarded the preoccupation of its pioneers with working class welfare and radical social change. The status quo required only refinement. Framed by public policy, its central concern was restoration of 'order' in the enterprise through a refurbished collective bargaining which left exploitation untouched. Its mission lay in civilising the employment relationship and institutionalizing conflict in a fashion which legitimated subordination. Academics became advisers to the state and apologists for management. In a situation 'where the attempt of men consciously to control their destinies clashes with social arrangements rooted in ignorance or manipulation' (Hyman, 1972a:10), he did not profess neutrality. Mainstream industrial relations was on the wrong side.

He did not give it up as a bad job. An accomplished sociologist and historian, he did not identify himself with these disciplines, although he was emphatic that engagement with them enriched industrial relations. Instead he sought to reforge its axis as 'the study of processes of control over work relations', rather than the orthodox 'study of the institutions of job regulation' (Hyman, 1975:9-31). In the

1970s 'industrial relations seemed caught in the time-warp of the transatlantic conservatism of the 1950s' (Hyman, 1989: ix). Almost single-handedly – Vic Allen was a dissident voice and the cause was enhanced by the defection from orthodoxy of Alan Fox – he attempted to reorientate and radicalize the field, to build on and transcend the concern the Webbs and GDH Cole had demonstrated with the ambitions, activity and emancipation of workers. Often objectified they remained the true subjects of industrial relations.

This was related to his political alignment. The tumults of the time – France, Vietnam, Ireland, the student revolt, the emergence of the womens' movement, militancy on a scale unprecedented for fifty years, failed to shake the industrial relations establishment. Yet: 'for any student of the subject who was involved in the contemporary politics of the left, there was an obvious need to develop an approach to industrial relations which could make sense of the assertiveness and combativity displayed by workers...The categories and insights derived from Marxist analysis had a clear relevance to this task' (ibid).

He was a member of IS from 1964 to 1976. He joined the Labour Party Young Socialists before going up to Balliol College Oxford in 1961. There he became involved in the University Labour Club, the National Association of Labour Student Organisations and the youth paper *Young Guard*, initially a collaboration between IS and the Trotskyist Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL) which went on to publish *Militant*. IS was a small group which grew from 200 members in 1964 to some 4,000 in 1977. It was initially open and flexible. Characterised by modesty, 'the politics of the long-haul' and creative construction of the sacred texts, it had evolved some distance from its origins in Trotskyism. Politically diverse, IS was ultimately dominated by the thinking of Tony Cliff. It was defined by the belief that

Russia and its satellites were state capitalist; that Western capitalism was experiencing a boom primed by arms expenditure; that reformism was decaying; and that orientation towards shop stewards and workplace struggle offered the best means to develop the consciousness indispensable to self-emancipation and ‘socialism from below’ (Cliff, 1964; Cliff and Barker, 1966; Kidron, 1968). In 1964, IS worked inside the Labour Party and was as libertarian as Leninist (Cliff, 1959). May 1968 in France motivated attempts to create a Leninist party. Thereafter, perceptions of Labour’s decline and intensified industrial struggle stimulated efforts to establish a National Rank and File Movement (NRFM). Difficulties provoked attempts to reach beyond stewards to ‘young workers’ and launch the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) (Birchall, 1981; Higgins, 1997; McIlroy, 2004, 2007).

This was the context in which Richard’s ideas developed through dialogue between professional work and political practice.² Strikes lay at the heart of his preoccupations. His interrogation of their relationship to class consciousness which briefly broadened academic industrial relations reflected his concerns as an IS member. However IS is mentioned perfunctorily in discussion of his engagement with Marxism (Frege et al, 2011: 211). Recent attention to his work on strikes concentrates not on the debates of the 1970s but on the subsequent decline of industrial action (Goddard, 2011). Neglect of socialist themes is justified by restricted conceptions of relevance and current political and research agendas. Yet the contributions of advocates of a long-fractured pluralism who worked in a vanished Keynesian, reformist paradigm have justifiably received recuperation (Kelly, 2010; Ackers, 2011). So, too, in any balanced history will the contrasting scholarship of their friend and critic, Richard Hyman.

My paper deals with his probing of connections between struggle and class consciousness embedded in consideration of trade unionism. It was and remains, of relevance to scholars. Discussion is particularly appropriate in *Capital and Class*. I relate his thinking in the 1970s to his involvement with IS and the ideas of Cliff which initially influenced him but which he came to question. After a critical sketch of IS industrial politics in the decade from 1966, I discuss the evolution of Richard's conceptions with reference to other Marxist thinkers and IS policy. The paper scrutinizes contemporary evaluations of the political implications of strikes by industrial relations scholars before concluding with comment on the position today.

Shop Stewards, Strikes, Industrial Relations and IS

From the 1950s full employment, confident workers, easy product markets and fragmented piece work systems stimulated the spread of stewards from below, workplace bargaining outside national agreements and 'wage drift'. This was driven by short sectional strikes typically unconstitutional – in breach of disputes procedures – and unofficial – lacking formal union involvement. They were associated with attempts to exercise control over work as well as wages. Inflationary consequences and impairment of management prerogative and union authority provoked engagement by the state to domesticate 'the challenge from below'. Landmarks were the accelerating implementation of incomes policy, the appointment of a Royal Commission on Trade Unions, and bids to combine reform with restriction in 'In Place of Strife' and the Industrial Relations Act (1971) (Clegg, 1970; Flanders, 1970). There was a degree of consensus 'all the way from Clegg to Cliff' (Sedgwick, 1970: 28) over what the Royal Commission termed 'the development of two systems of industrial relations' (Donovan, 1968:12). For most academics, managers, union leaders and politicians 'disorder' was to be resolved by integrating stewards and

institutionalising workplace relations via extended company agreements. For revolutionary socialists ‘disorder’ was not a problem but an opportunity.

As early as 1957, Seymour Papert alerted socialists to these developments in the press of IS’s predecessor, the *Socialist Review* Group. Unofficial strikes reflected ‘a tendency for the shop to revolt against the trade union bureaucracy’ and to ‘organise not only *independently* of the central trade union but even in *conflict* with it’. Moreover, ‘the idea of workers’ control... is implicit in their struggles to a sufficient degree to form a basis for socialist propaganda’. Socialists should concentrate on the factories. In comparison with Labour Party activity: ‘Here if anywhere, is the ground where the idea of a militant socialist movement can grow...it will not do so unless marxists are able to forge healthy links with the workers involved’ (Papert, 1957: 122, 124, 125).

These insights were developed in Cliff and Colin Barker’s book on incomes policy aimed at stewards. Democratic organization, substantially independent of, often in conflict with the union bureaucracy, at the point of production where exploitation was directly experienced could generate consciousness of the antagonistic role of capital and the state. Joint stewards’ committees could establish unity. Following Papert, Cliff and Barker – citing the work of Bert Turner – saw stewards and strikes as manifesting a striving for control: ‘the rise of the shop stewards organisations and the number of unofficial strikes are symptoms (among other things) of the common aspirations of the working class: towards workers’ control...The urge for workers’ control is becoming more stridently expressed in strikes as the decline in the proportion of strikes over purely wage issues shows’ (Cliff and Barker, 1966: 89, 90).

Earlier Cliff had related reformism to general working class prosperity rather than Lenin's labour aristocracy. He acknowledged its ideological resilience but claimed: 'Every struggle...by increasing self-confidence and education undermines Reformism' (1957:57) Workers' activity was now shifting from the Labour Party towards a fragmented 'do-it-yourself' reformism on the shop floor. This stimulated revolutionary consciousness: 'Wherever "do-it-yourself" reforms are won the seeds of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class are being sown' (ibid: 135). There was another side to things: 'the shop stewards' organisations are largely restricted to the narrow horizon of economic, trade union demands. They are largely speaking, politically apathetic' (ibid: 105). The two sides, fragmentation and factory consciousness on the one hand, struggles sowing the seeds of socialism on the other, were never brought together or resolved. Without argument the latter predominated, at least in the text. After noting the former problems, the authors declared:

When in the future the capitalist system enters into sharper contradictions...then out of the shop stewards' organisations will rise a new socialist movement, much mightier than ever before. Its roots will be in the class struggle at the point of production, and it will lead the fight against all forms of oppression. To defend and extend the shop stewards' organisation of today is to build the socialist movement of tomorrow; to fight for the socialist movement of tomorrow is to strengthen the shop stewards of today (ibid: 105-6).

How a new socialist movement would develop from workplace organisation by-passing the established labour movement was unclear. The implication was that revolutionary consciousness would emerge semi-spontaneously. There were echoes of C. L. R. James' refusal of political leadership and Cornelius Castoriadis' conception of 'an autonomous movement towards socialism that originates in the workers' struggle against the capitalist organization of production' (Castoriadis, 1988:199). Beyond capitalist crisis in the future and politicization inherent in the

state offensive today, there was no mention of agency or socialist organisation. IS perceived its role as servicing the struggle, 'linking up the fragments' or, some felt, 'immersing itself in the fragments', rather than intervening politically (Birchall 1967). The perspective was based on economism, over-estimation of stewards and strikes and suspicion of Leninism.³

Michael Kidron's *Western Capitalism Since the War* (1968) was also influential. Reformism was digging its own grave: 'thrusting politics into the workplace, Social Democracy is contributing directly to that fusion of politics and economics...which it has always rightly feared as a violently unstable mixture' (ibid: 123). Published two years later, Cliff's *The Employers' Offensive* contained invaluable analysis of state policy and productivity deals. It reached activists: 10,000 copies were sold in three weeks (Collard, 1995: 26; Cliff, 1970: 2) State politicization was again stressed: 'By raising the issue of productivity the government and the employers are forcing politics onto the shop floor' (ibid:143). The relationship between strikes and socialist ideas was again highlighted:

...this demand for workers' control is only partial; it is essentially *defensive*; it is fragmentary; and it is bound by the limits of the shop or factory. But this demand... a demand that is voiced in a thousand different ways everyday that workers go to work, is the embryo of full working class control at every level of society, political and economic alike. For socialists it is the most important fact about modern industrial capitalism...the thousand and one ways in which they express their demands implicitly and explicitly, for control over their own lives, is the embryo of workers' power, of socialism (ibid: 203).

The problems with slipping from conceiving strikes as forms of resistance within capitalism to categorizing them as overtures to demands to replace capitalism with socialism are obvious. The danger of conflating defensive, sectional struggles over manning, overtime and speed-up which seek to regulate the labour process in the

capitalist workplace as constituting the embryo of a socialist society requires little emphasis. The book again contained two discourses.⁴ Cliff again rehearsed the contradictions without resolving them. Citing research for the Royal Commission which characterised stewards as responsible influences, lubricants rather than irritants, he discerned ‘an insidious trend’ towards bureaucratisation. Full-time convenors were increasing in number. Many became divorced from their base: ‘In many cases workers became alienated not only from the union officials but even from the shop stewards’. Moreover: ‘When the majority of workers are not really socialist or even militant, the shop stewards they elect cannot be either’ (ibid: 205). This placed a tremendous transformative burden on struggle, spontaneity and the strike although: ‘the political offensive of the ruling class pushes politics onto the shop floor’ (ibid: 231). However, albeit in the final sentences of the book and without elaboration, Cliff invoked the agency of revolutionary socialists in developing consciousness: ‘We need politics, we need socialist politics. We need a revolutionary socialist movement’ (ibid: 232).

France convinced Cliff that a democratic centralist party provided the missing ingredient (Cliff and Birchall 1968). IS moved from variants of autonomism to versions of Leninism and voluntarism. Interest in creating a rank and file movement similar to the Minority Movement of the 1920s as a bridge between party and class developed. Economic crisis was unfolding and Trotskyism reasserted itself. With 2000 members and peripheral union penetration IS, it was claimed, ‘represents a base on which a party could be built’ (Higgins and Palmer, 1971: 13). Support for bigger strikes ‘more militancy for more pay’ which would render workers susceptible to revolutionary ideas accompanied calls to ‘build the party’. There was scant evidence that events had inspired revolutionary consciousness among stewards. They failed to

join IS in significant numbers. From 1974, with a tougher climate and defections, expulsions and declining democracy inside IS, Cliff sought new audiences (McIlroy, 2007: 273-85).

From 1968 he detected 'a vacuum on the Left' (1971: 248). Diminishing reformism on inadequate evidence did not eradicate it: it handicapped contesting its continued power. Members observed 'The Myth of the British Working Class Movement' and 'the pretence' of the Labour-union link (Sedgwick, 1971: 26-37). Limitations did not denote irrelevance. The emergence of radical union leaders, the recomposition of labourism in the Social Contract and subsequent revival of the Labour left demonstrated that neither reformism nor the two-way link between Labour and its affiliated unions were exhausted. And if stewards were 'the pillars on which any real revolutionary socialist policy must rely' (Cliff, 1971: 234), they remained workplace bargainers, part of the union. They did not represent autonomous workers' committees or proto-revolutionary workers' councils. The workplace was the place to begin but socialists operate at all levels in the unions. As Perry Anderson reflected (1967: 277-8) every socialist must defend stewards: 'But it is wrong to counterpose them to trade unions as such'. It was essential to fight for militant, democratic unions as part of the struggle in the workplace and to surmount sectionalism and unevenness within and between workplaces: 'The economic struggle which has been the traditional purpose of trade unionism must, then, be complemented by the struggle to recover the unions for their members' (ibid).

It would be mistaken to claim IS ignored these issues. It downplayed them, and exaggerated the decline of the wider movement and allegiance to it. Yet unions not only threatened Clegg-style 'incorporation' but promised potential for unity, centralization, combating oppression and generating consciousness of class beyond

the workplace. In engineering, militant stewards had always been involved in external machinery; they were increasingly active inside unions such as the Transport and General Workers Union. The hostility of officials was abating, there was co-operation as well as conflict between officials and stewards, while bureaucratization, as Cliff acknowledged, did not stop at the factory gates. Moreover Cliff drew fairly uncritically on Clegg: the model of workplace strength, independence and propensity to strike was far from typical. It was concentrated in engineering and other industries with fractional bargaining. Even there, it neglected differentiation between both stewards and members and unevenness in organisation (England, 1981; Batstone, 1984).

IS was right about the impact of state intervention on militancy if not politics. After 1968, the pattern of strikes changed towards larger confrontations over wages, often with the government, marshalled by union leaders. Political strikes, occupations and solidarity action re-emerged; strikes spread to white collar workers and across the public sector. Despite growing economic problems, struggle and consciousness remained uneven: there was a downturn in 1973 after the turbulence of 1972, resurgence in 1974, decline in 1975. In what was, for all its deficiencies, the most favourable conjuncture since 1919, Cliff increasingly rejected long distance perspectives and deduction of consciousness from workers' practice. After France, faith in explosions and sudden spurts of consciousness replaced conventional barometers and privileged impressionism and intuition: 'deep alienation of workers from traditional organisations eroded all such barometers' (Cliff, 1969, quoted 2000: 196). Factory branches and the NRFM were inaugurated in 1973 when IS had 2,700 members and a handful of industrial cadres. As voluntarism encountered the

constraints of consciousness and objective circumstance, Cliff turned from stewards to 'young workers' (Cliff 1974).

His third book appeared against this background. There was sparse attention to steward organisation. It was subsumed under an amorphous 'rank and file'. Reinforced by struggles of women and black workers its importance was highlighted by the desertion of left leaders to the Social Contract. The need to combat this inside the unions was limited to advice to work in local branches (Cliff, 1975: 150). *The Crisis* was frequently the mixture as before. Labour's base was withering; the party was divorced from 'real workers' indifferent to Parliament; revolutionary consciousness was growing, 'the harsh reality of the last few years has hammered the concept of the separation of politics from economics into the ground' (ibid: 178). The infirmities of the reformist Communist Party (CP) were anatomised (ibid: 171-177). Constructing revolutionary organisation was urgent: 'It is now possible to talk and talk credibly, of the need to build a socialist workers party that will sweep away capitalism. Building such a party is now fully on the agenda. It is a challenge the International Socialists willingly accept' (ibid: 182).

Modesty and the long-haul were replaced by magnification of prospects, impatience, voluntarist emphasis on the action of revolutionaries and the premature, Trotskyist couplet: demise of Labour/birth of revolutionary party. But, Cliff (2000: 154) recalled, 'the actual impact of the book was almost zero'. The good times were gone. Factory branches faded away. The NRFM was stillborn. Energies turned to the Right to Work Campaign. The birth of the SWP in 1977 represented the closing of the chapter (McIlroy, 2007: 273-83).

Strikes and Class Consciousness

In this context, and as part of debates around IS from the late 1960s about the need for a party and its relationship to consciousness and militancy, Hyman explored existing theory. *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* reflected the open-ended critical method IS had encouraged but would increasingly neglect. It still stands as a powerful essay in elucidation which educated thousands. It organized the literature into 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' traditions, according to whether it discerned revolutionary potential in union activity. Contrary to criticism (Cliff and Gluckstein, 1986: 26), Hyman (1971: 12) was sensitive to historical change; that point requires emphasis. The British trade unionism Marx and Engels addressed was, as Lenin recognised, different from Russian trade unionism in 1905 or 1917 or the Italian collectivism of 1919-20 discussed by Gramsci. These theorists thought in a universe without radio, telephones, television or computers, in societies dramatically different from the advanced capitalism of the 1970s, a world in which socialism was unfettered by the subsequent story of reformism and Stalinism. These are not details; they influence the formation of consciousness.

Marx and Engels represented the optimistic tradition. They described British unions in the 1840s as 'schools of war' which trained workers to fight capitalism and transformed 'a class in itself' to 'a class for itself'. The defeat of Chartism and the emergence of 'the labour aristocracy' produced more contradictory and pessimistic estimations. Trade unionism could reconcile itself to an economic role, and workers to bargaining within capitalism. It was not, as earlier envisaged, a vehicle for socialism but rather 'fighting with effects not causes'. It remained as the 'new

unionism' of the 1880s confirmed, an important means of developing class consciousness (ibid: 4-11).

For most Marxists in 1971 Lenin personified the orthodox and for Hyman pessimistic perspective, although there was growing interest in Gramsci. Few of Gramsci's writings had been published but Anderson had popularised his approach. In this analysis unions generate working class or corporate consciousness, awareness of the class's separate identity and distinctive interests in capitalism. This was different from socialist consciousness, the hegemonic vision of a new society combined with the will to create it. The former was a stage towards the latter which required a revolutionary party for its creation (Anderson, 1967: 273-5). Anderson saw little difference between Gramsci and Lenin although it is doubtful whether Lenin conceived corporate consciousness as a necessary preparation for revolutionary consciousness.⁵

As Hyman explained, in his most influential work, *What is to be Done?* (Lenin, 1902, 1970) Lenin argued that trade unionism produced trade union consciousness, determination to combine to combat employers and press the state to introduce favourable legalisation. Revolutionary consciousness entailed awareness of the irresolvable conflict between workers and the existing system. Trade union consciousness was bourgeois ideology and held no threat to capitalism (Hyman, 1971: 11-13). Hyman underlined the provenance of *What is to be Done?* in party polemic, its preoccupation with the problem of outlawed unions and Lenin's admonition against wider application. Moreover it sometimes clashed with Lenin's analysis before and after 1902. This reflected both a pessimistic and optimistic stance on strikes stimulating revolutionary consciousness. More recently questions have been raised about the translation and interpretation of this canonical text (Lih, 2006).⁶ It

remains relevant to discuss how far its ideas, as then understood, or the competing optimistic conception of 'On Strikes' (Lenin, 1899, 1977) deepened understanding of the relationship between industrial struggle and revolutionary politics during the 1970s.

With others in IS, Hyman questioned conceptions of 'a rigid dichotomy' between trade union and revolutionary consciousness, the first emerging 'spontaneously', the second encouraged by engagement with revolutionary theory and its custodian, the revolutionary party. He cited Eric Hobsbawm's definition of the former as covering immediate economic demands and organisation to achieve them; but also including, vaguely and not invariably, a general discontent with capitalism, a general desire for an alternative society and a general idea of its socialist lines. These latter aspects were of minor practical significance most of the time. They could surface: 'when the complete overthrow of the existing system appears likely or immediately practicable' (Hobsbawm, quoted Hyman, 1971: 40). Noting the differences with Lenin's formulation, Hyman inquired whether Lenin's insistence on a gulf, 'no middle ideology' between trade union and revolutionary consciousness 'may mask a continuum along which escalation is in certain circumstances possible' (ibid: 40-41). In particular situations could workers travel, 'spontaneously' along the spectrum?

Hyman rehearsed Lenin's more upbeat estimations and Luxemburg's positive assessment of the growth of revolutionary consciousness in the mass strikes of 1905. Rosa saw this as predominantly 'the spontaneous product of the unfettered movement...the initiative and conscious leadership of the social-democratic organisations played an exceedingly small role' (ibid: 42). With the exception of Lenin's 1899 article, which itself appraised a strike wave, all these comments

reflected on mass strikes in revolutionary situations in an autocratic peasant society with a small proletariat. Kautsky's rejoinder to Luxemburg's attempt to transfer the model from Russia to Wilhelmine Germany was to point out that Germany was not in the revolutionary situation from which Luxemburg's model was deduced. Hobsbawm, too, was talking of escalation of consciousness when an overthrow of capitalism was on the cards. How we get to that situation which Lenin and Kautsky defined as characterised by a crisis of confidence of the regime and the presence of a revolutionary party with mass support (Kautsky, 1909, 1994) is as important as what happens if we get there. The conclusion that in revolutionary circumstances the potential of strikes may be transformative while 'in perhaps more typical circumstances the spontaneous development of workers' consciousness may fail absolutely to transcend the confines of bourgeois ideology' (Hyman, 1971: 52), leaves us with the problem of the impact of strikes on consciousness outside a revolutionary situation and how conventional strikes contribute to creating it.

In relation to that difficulty Hobsbawm's conception of existing trade union consciousness appears over-optimistic with regard to Britain in 1949, when it was first published or 1971, when Labour had just been voted out of office and as Cliff acknowledged most stewards were neither militant nor socialist. Hobsbawm arguably exaggerated the ease of the transition from trade union to revolutionary consciousness. If we grant that many trade unionists felt general discontent with the system and vague aspirations towards a better one, whether many identified that with a socialist society, certainly beyond state capitalism, remains problematic. For most, matters unquestionably stopped there. Writing a little after Hyman, Mann delineated four elements in class consciousness: identity, defining oneself as working class; opposition, the perception that capitalists and their agents are our enduring antagonists;

totality, acceptance of these two elements as the determining characteristics of social position; and finally, the conception of an alternative society to be realised through struggle with our antagonists. He concluded: 'True revolutionary consciousness is the combination of all four and an obviously rare occurrence' (Mann, 1973: 13).

This judgement was based on evidence from Britain and Western Europe. Neither strikes nor experience of control in the workplace had produced escalation from opposition to transcendence, embracing the goal of an alternative society and determination to achieve it. There was inadequate evidence to justify the belief that struggle outside insurrectionary conjunctures fostered revolutionary consciousness on any significant, enduring scale. In the light of post-war experience it is plausible that moving from Mann's first three – arguably two – elements to his fourth, to revolutionary consciousness, constitutes a tough transition in modern capitalism. It involves qualitative change and disjuncture. It requires a rupture with defensive oppositional consciousness.

This view is strengthened if we consider further trade union consciousness under-explored and underestimated by the IS leadership after 1968 (see, for example, Lockwood, 1966; Goldthorpe et al, 1968-9; Beynon, 1973; Nichols and Armstrong, 1976). Ideas about ownership, profit, joint interest, conflict, the wage-effort bargain and relativities were components of wider 'social structurally generated normative assumptions' (Hyman and Brough, 1975:6). Part of reformist consciousness the cohesion of trade union consciousness and its hold over workers divided by occupation, locality, gender and ethnicity should not be exaggerated. Diversity, differential adaptation to dominant values, the negotiated forms subordination sometimes took (Mann, 1970; Parkin, 1971) should not be ignored. But strains of individualism, chauvinism, authoritarianism, imbrication with bourgeois ideology,

ultimate acceptance of capitalism went largely unchallenged. They were buttressed by a leadership which reinforced the industrial-political and gendered home-workplace divides and provided little extension of oppositional values through media of any sophistication (Hyman and Brough, 1975: 211-23). Raymond Williams' assertion that working class culture was articulated in its institutions, the unions, Labour Party and cooperative movement, may suffer from romanticism. They were 'a remarkable creative achievement' which reflected and reinforced workers lived experience (Williams, 1958: 312-14). Reformists could point to the changes they had engineered to demonstrate labourism worked. The condition, though not the position, of the working class had been ameliorated. As Anderson observed, they 'checked the emergence of a hegemonic socialism in England' (Anderson, 1965: 38-9).

Ideas embedded in trade union consciousness were antagonistic to revolutionary consciousness. Bolstered by social processes and coercion, they included the inevitability of inequality, a degree of sexism and racism, selective opposition to violence, pessimistic calculations of the power of the state and the gamble inherent in revolution, as well as the risk of what it might produce, particularly when Russia was invoked. Its positive emphasis, the efficacy of reform in comparison with revolution had deep roots in working class life as a tested explanation of workers' predicament under capitalism and a strategy for improving it. Reformist consciousness was neither a series of misunderstandings nor a set of delusions easily dispelled by economic difficulties and Marxist agitation. Where embracing revolution required resistance to sophisticated pressures and corporate consciousness, disseminated by trade unionism, was hegemonic among leaders, stewards and members, the idea of replacing capitalism with socialism typically appeared insubstantial and dreams of storming heaven just that.

If trade union consciousness was hegemonic, this was because it embodied views on society and politics beyond issues at work. Were revolutionaries employing the best means and selecting the best site to tackle it? Lenin had remarked:

Is it correct that the economic struggle is generally “the most widely applicable means” for involving the mass in the political struggle? It is absolutely incorrect. None the less “widely applicable” means for such “involvement” are *all and sundry* manifestations of political oppression and autocratic arbitrariness, and by no means only such manifestations as are connected with the economic struggle...Social Democrats not only cannot limit themselves to the economic struggle, but cannot allow the organisation of economic arraignments to constitute their predominant activity (Lenin, 1902: 106, 104).

Despite their context these comments were pertinent to IS. It would be mistaken to maintain it ignored the monarchy, the family, feminism, racism, education, Ireland, or the Labour Party. The economic struggle constituted its constrictive, ‘predominant activity’ (c.f. Kidron, 1977: 6). Moreover the methods IS prioritised to recruit workers to political struggle through the medium of ‘economic arraignments’ were questionable. Agitation was often consciously confined to economic identities and bread and butter issues rather than using them as a beginning to develop understanding of ‘political oppression’. Lenin’s stress on politics was dismissed as ‘abstract propagandism’ – the confidence of workers had to be gained first. This approach was a variant of economism: it did not consistently address the totality of workers’ social existence or consciousness. So how could it change it? (McIlroy, 2007: 273-4). We will see that as Hyman’s ideas evolved he came to understand this; Cliff never did.

IS’s failure, at a time when social identities were increasingly important, to grasp consciousness as social awareness interacted with inability to comprehend the locus of organisation necessary to try to transform it. The organic gestation and reproduction of consciousness, not only at work, but in all social institutions –

labourist or reformist consciousness are superior terms to trade union consciousness – requires a total social response. Instead the far left indulged in fractured politics and organisation. IS concentrated on the workplace, to a lesser degree the unions, its erstwhile partners in *Young Guard*, the RSL, on entrism in the Labour Party. Size may dictate specialisation. In these cases it derived largely from fragmented political calculation as to where the action was. Practice further restricted vision and encouraged adaptation to economism and reformism respectively.

Hyman's second concern related to bureaucracy and tendencies to union co-optation by capital and the state. Reviewing the literature, he identified countervailing pressures to integration and oligarchy, particularly the democratic ethos of unions and leaders' accountability to members (Hyman, 1971: 31-37). Workplace organisation provided a further constraint. In contrast with Cliff, Hyman perceived the steward as 'a crucial link' between members and the union, able to exert influence on national policy or act independently of it. Stewards represented a barrier to bureaucratization although they themselves were subject to it. Strategies of incorporation aimed to exploit stewards' 'exposure to precisely the same integrating pressures as operate on the full-time official' (ibid: 33). Membership demands, workplace democracy and left leaders offering support for stewards reinforced grassroots militancy and suggested the limits of bureaucratisation: incorporation was far from predetermined. Overall, 'no *general* theory is available to relate the struggle for reforms to the development of consciousness' (ibid: 53). Whether trade union consciousness could be surpassed in the absence of an influential revolutionary party remained an open question. Hyman rejected spontaneism and syndicalism. But not workers' creative capacity to develop radical ideas. The issue was not the necessity or otherwise of a

party. But, as Gramsci insisted, the centrality of an open, dialogical relationship between party and workers.

Actually Existing Strikes and Revolutionary Realism

The *Sociology of Trade Unionism* revealed Hyman as an intellectual activist rooted in confidence in workers' self-activity and the plasticity of trade unionism. He leant towards optimism in relation to consciousness and pioneered it in relation to bureaucracy. His work asserted the indispensability of a continual conversation between proletariat and party in assembling revolutionary consciousness. It was an antidote to conceptions of proletarian passivity as well as fatalism about incorporation which underpinned exaggerated emphasis on the workplace as against the union and alibied deficiencies in the consciousness of stewards and members. Ensuing events which saw left leaders accept Conservative incomes policy and Labour's Social Contract indicated not only their interests in organisational security and bargaining with the state but the resilience of trade union consciousness at all levels of the movement (Coates, 1980: 53-85).

Hyman returned to these issues in *Strikes*, intended for a broader audience and largely devoted to analysing conventional strikes as rational assertions of resistance to capitalism, best comprehended as episodes in a continuing struggle for control. Conflict stemmed from capitalism. It was fundamental. But its manifestations were contingent on the role of the state, employer strategy, the economic and political conjuncture, the balance of class forces and the agency of workers. Stewards were perceived by most managers as less militant than their members, 'more often associated with attempts to prevent strikes than to foment them' (Hyman, 1972a: 60, 53). He was sceptical about Cliff's assertion that growth in strikes over control, as

distinct from wages, represented a significant trend. The statistics were distorted by large numbers of stoppages in mining – which recorded the majority of strikes nationally – classified as ‘other wage disputes’ and involving ‘other working arrangements’. Taken to denote disputes over control they typically reflected the system of pit bargaining over piece rates. Outside mining only 30 per cent of stoppages fell into these categories and many dubiously expressed an urge for workers control (ibid: 120-2).

It was possible to agree with André Gorz - his argument extended Cliff’s - that strikes over wages indicated suppressed desire for control over work; or alternatively that workers meant what they said and economic demands authentically expressed their aspirations. As Hyman observed, the argument about the meaning of reasons given for striking rested on assumptions about work which constituted the framework for interpreting these reasons and could not be proved or disproved. It seemed plausible that where control of production was judged illegitimate there was some displacement. But competing explanations need not represent alternatives. Strikes could be ‘a reflection *both* of a natural heightening of economic aspirations, *and* of the tentative articulation of discontent at oppressive management control and dehumanizing conditions of work’ (ibid: 132).

Gorz posited latent consciousness: workers held half-buried beliefs in lives liberated from alienation which were expressed in strikes. Putting a price on dehumanization, rather than challenging it, might of itself suggest that alternatives to capitalism were consciously perceived as utopian. On another reading no alternative was perceived even latently: rather workers’ lack of control over their labour was viewed as one among innumerable disadvantages inherent not only in capitalism but in the human condition. Despite theories of ‘dual consciousness’, purveyed by a left

which seized on alienation for consolation in an affluent society, unofficial strikes plausibly reflected trade union consciousness. They constituted the expressions of protest which have perennially characterised labour under capitalism (Eldridge, 1968: 90).

Did they possess wider significance? Hyman believed not. He questioned whether the much-quoted passage in Lenin's 'On Strikes' – they opened workers' eyes to the nature of capitalism and the state – had great relevance to contemporary Britain. Moreover, there was little evidence that strikes in revolutionary situations initiated or brought to a favourable conclusion the revolutionary process. The strike remained an unsatisfactory political weapon:

It is therefore difficult to imagine that strikes could ever spontaneously develop into the mechanism of an open assault on managerial authority, let alone broader political authority. If workers' struggles should acquire a higher rationale than they at present possess, they would almost certainly need to transcend purely industrial forms of organisation...if industrial conflict were to extend into an explicit challenge to existing structures of control, this challenge would require the organization and articulation of an openly political movement (1972a: 143-4).

Hyman addressed 'normal' strikes neglected in the *Sociology of Trade Unionism*. Their impact on consciousness was limited: 'strikes of the sort discussed by Donovan relate to particular exercises of managerial control and are not directed against the structure of this control as such' (ibid: 156). Participation, as many in IS believed, could alter attitudes to power and authority. Such changes often diminished afterwards but were unlikely to disappear. Valuable as it was, this did not constitute revolutionary consciousness. That required politicization of industrial conflict, and confluence with wider struggles and the demands of women's liberation, anti-racism and the student revolt. There were encouraging signs such as renewed interest in industrial democracy. But 'unless the educative potential of workers' struggle is

realized – unless the demand for control becomes increasingly explicit – the efforts of managers and strikers to resolve their respective strike problems will continue to be mutually neutralising’ (ibid: 178).

In the aftermath of 1972 Hyman’s analysis compared with that of the IS leadership, was restrained: ‘If there has been an upsurge in militancy, it has in the main been militancy of a restricted and sectional kind’ (Hyman, 1974: 125). Assembling a wealth of detail to analyse stoppages since 1960, acknowledging the miners’ strike, the solidarity with the ‘Pentonville Dockers’, occupations and mobile picketing, inferring consciousness from action, he found insufficient evidence that the traditionally limited aims of strikes had been transcended. Militancy was understandable in an age of stagflation while the Industrial Relations Act was in some ways a provocation. The volatility of strikes was marked, witness their decline in 1973. Although sectional stoppages entailed workers acting to some degree in contradiction with the dominant ideology they accepted its unsympathetic characterisations of other workers’ disputes. Strikers did not endorse bourgeois ideology in relation to their own strikes ‘but this activity is itself often transient, rarely resulting in any enduring revision of consciousness. There is very little evidence to support the romantic belief that participation in a major industrial struggle generates an “explosion of consciousness” with lasting consequences’ (ibid: 126).

Citing Mann’s elements of consciousness, Hyman judged recent struggles reflected little but the first two categories. Revolutionary consciousness was ‘vestigial’. He dismissed the idea it could develop autonomously. Rather it

must be constructed, indeed fought for in a continuous struggle against the grip of bourgeois ideology: a struggle which is only possible because existing

working class consciousness *does* contain contradictions and because workers taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of their society *do* come into constant conflict with their immediate experiences and activities (ibid: 129).

There was realistic optimism. But, Hyman recognised, the contradictions between workers' beliefs and bourgeois ideology centred on subcultural values were subordinate and defensive, sometimes cynical and fatalistic. Workers' actions damaged capitalism; they were rarely conscious of positive implications in this. Political education and organisation remained imperative. Moreover:

to transcend mere syndicalism a further dimension is necessary. The national trade union constitutes the direct link between workers in the individual factories and as members of a class; in addition it possesses considerable influence over the attitudes of the rank and file on many issues and has traditional claims on their loyalty. For both reasons it cannot be ignored; the struggle for rank and file control of the trade unions must be a natural extension of the shop floor struggle. (This does not mean that the campaign for control of the union can be regarded – as has been the case – as a substitute for rank and file activity) (ibid: 131).

Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction, published on the cusp of a more difficult period, codified these ideas. In the Britain of 1975 there was no 'clear and extended consciousness of common working class interests, let alone a coherent vision of an alternative society and a determination to struggle for its achievement' (Hyman, 1975: 202). Throughout these years Hyman had pondered whether incomes policy, inflation and militancy might transform restricted conceptions of 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay' – at the heart of trade union consciousness – and the limited range of comparisons which underpinned them. Orbits of comparison expanded; the revolutionary implications of redefining 'fairness' were not realised (see Hyman, 1971; Hyman and Brough, 1975). However, capitalism faced more frequent struggles and their extension to women and black workers. Lukács had remarked there was

nothing inevitable about the impact of history on consciousness. Nonetheless, there would be opportunities for the conscious minority, ‘for revolutionary organisation to interact with rank and file militancy...As bargaining *within* capitalism comes to yield shrinking gains (and indeed to require a *deterioration* in conditions) trade unionists can be expected to become more and more susceptible to the idea of its elimination’ (Hyman, 1975: 202).

Strikes and Consciousness: Beyond IS

Thus far Hyman’s work remained within the IS problematic. It was more evidenced and nuanced, more sensitive to the limitations of militancy, more reliant on ‘conventional barometers’, and more quizzical about bureaucracy and the malleability of bureaucrats. He harboured the qualifications and reservations of a revolutionary intellectual.⁷ Like Cliff, he emphasised the centrality of workplace organisation to trade unionism and revolutionary politics. He deployed a model of the engineering steward but increasingly highlighted the weaknesses of shop floor organisation, its links with officialdom and susceptibility to the pressures operating on full-time staff. He never subscribed in his writings to Cliff’s idealisation of stewards nor subsequent dismissal of them. A developing difference from 1972 was Hyman’s situating of struggle within trade unionism beyond the workplace and in opposition to all forms of oppression in society not simply exploitation at work. His focus on rank and file agency still took inadequate account of the relationship between workplace politics and democracy and policy in the unions and Labour Party, the resilience of reformist ideas and practice and, consequently, the importance of struggle within not only the unions but, via the organic link, the party.⁸

He eschewed voluntarism. He adhered to patience and the long-haul while Cliff pursued shortcuts. Hyman's conclusions about strikes were in IS terms sober. Their relationship with revolutionary consciousness was, in normal circumstances, tenuous. Even in revolutionary periods they could never substitute for a political challenge organised by a party. At times Cliff agreed, citing Luxemburg's invocation of the labours of Sisyphus to illustrate the intractability of strikes as instruments in transforming consciousness. More frequently he perceived progress as stimulated by large-scale economic militancy: 'When workers ask for a few shillings a week in a single shop, the ideological veil covering the system as a whole is not pulled aside but when 100,000 workers demand a 20% rise to keep up with rising prices the class struggle moves to centre stage' (quoted in Callaghan, 1987: 105).

Always an independent thinker, events and experience widened Hyman's differences with IS. Knowing history and the car factories, he opposed factory branches as a concession to economism and fragmentation: the revolutionary ideal was not the union leader but Lenin's tribune of the people combating all forms of oppression in all sectors of society (Hyman, 1972b). He became intellectually dissatisfied with simplified distinctions between bureaucracy and rank and file. The impasse of the NRFM and emphasis on the Right to Work Campaign, rather than long term work in stewards' committees and unions, increased his disquiet. His book with James Hinton on the early CP countenanced against the impatient overambition and disregard of objective constraint which has disfigured revolutionary politics in Britain. It historicized and demystified IS romanticisation of the Minority Movement and factory branches. Objectives had to be related to the conjuncture, the 1970s, not the 1920s, and there were no shortcuts (Hinton and Hyman, 1975). Increasingly critical of Cliff and his growing dominance in the organisation, he never supported the

factions which developed questioning state capitalism, economism and much else – which is not to say he did not accept some of their criticisms. However, with other comrades in Coventry he resigned from IS in September 1976. They cited an ultra-left perspective on propaganda campaigns, the precipitate decision to declare IS the revolutionary party and stand 50 candidates in the general election, as well as a decline in internal democracy which rendered this difficult to counteract (Villiers et al, 1976).⁹

Thereafter he felt freer in thinking through ideas (Hyman, 1979: 64). He produced a deceptively simple but far-reaching insight: bureaucracy denoted not so much a stratum as a relationship permeating trade unionism. The contradictions in workplace organisation had been significantly resolved in a ‘bureaucratization of the rank and file’ which facilitated the Social Contract and ensuing downturn (ibid). This, he stressed, was only part of the explanation alongside unemployment and reassertion of reformist ideology (Hyman, 1980: 72-3). The British left he now believed, had prematurely pronounced the death of social democracy and its hold over workers. This was integral to an economism which provided too little attention to political ideas and institutions and failed to comprehend ‘the remarkable flexibility of labourist ideology, with its subtle blend of notions of class and reformism, nation and sacrifice’ (ibid: 72).

Reformism structured consciousness. But materialist analysis had to grasp that consciousness was rooted in practice. It was bound up with bargaining, in the workplace as well as at district and national level. Ideology was not only about ideas in workers’ heads but the forms of action inherent in organisation and struggle. There was a material connection between ‘sectionalism, reformism and the practice of even militant trade union representation and bargaining’. And we might add strikes. In

consequence, Hyman doubted whether ‘class unity, class consciousness and class struggle can be developed merely by a strategy of “politicising” trade union militancy in its present form’. Quoting Lenin he emphasised: ‘It is not their situation and experiences *within the employment relationship alone* which constitute workers as a class... “we *shall never be able* to develop the political consciousness of the workers...by keeping within the framework of the economic struggle, for *that framework is too narrow*”’ (ibid: 77). It was imperative: ‘to get out of the ghetto in which traditional strategies of “rank and fileism” so easily confine us and seek to develop solidarity and struggle around *every* section of the class and *every* arena of its oppression’ (ibid. For an unconvincing response see Hallas, 1980).

Attempting to engender revolutionary consciousness by politicising industrial struggle, the SWP was emulating Sisyphus. Trade union consciousness could not be transcended by revolutionary trade union politics, only by class politics embracing the workplace, the family, the community, the polity, ethnicity and gender. Revolutionary politics needed to present positive proposals in the economic sphere such as workers’ plans of production.¹⁰ Henceforth Hyman turned away from exploration of strikes and consciousness urging broader conceptions of the working class and working class struggle, although he still scrutinized strike mobilization and leadership (Hyman, 1982, 1986). Action at the point of production, remained a crucial component of progress, ‘the most significant example we have of sustained working class challenge to the underlying principles of capitalist society’ (Hyman, 1985: 251).

By 1984, he characterised strikes as ‘expressions of resistance’ with ‘intimations of hope and creativity’ although, he insisted, they should be related to wider social movements. But he rejected the view that union struggle constituted the

organising centre of class struggle: “Always disabling, such a conception is suicidal when so many workers – and so many who are at most marginally integrated within the realm of wage labour – place high priority on problems and commitments outside of employment, and are willing to act collectively in such contexts’ (Hyman, 1984: 234). At the end of that decade he concluded: ‘strikes bear no *necessary* relationship to political radicalism; nevertheless they remain of vital importance as expressions of resistance to the dominant repressive trends of our time’ (Hyman, 1989: 238).

It is a judgement supported by contemporary studies. Lane and Roberts’ account of the stoppage of glassworkers at Pilkingtons in 1970 reminds us of the problems. Only 900 of 8,000 strikers consistently supported the strike; only 400 were active. Some found it an education. A majority of the strike committee emerged with new perceptions of unions, employers, the media and democracy; even here a sizeable minority continued to see Britain as a fair society. At best the strike encouraged militancy in a minority. Moreover, responses to left groups including IS ranged from disinterest to disparagement (Lane and Roberts, 1970: 105, 169-70, 201-2, 176-7).

Examinations of general strikes in Belgium 1960-61 and France 1968 suggested ‘explosions’ in areas with pre-existing union consciousness. They engaged workers with little tradition of struggle who employed militant methods and expressed interest in workers’ self-management. There was minimal evidence of enduring orientation towards revolution (Chaumont, 1962; Dubois et al, 1971). Mann (1971:48-50) discussed a 1966 walk-out at Vauxhall often offered as an “explosion of consciousness”. This dramatic episode deposited no revolutionary residue. Industrial relations returned to routine with calm punctuated by conventional stoppages. Allen’s reflections on the miners’ strikes of 1972 and 1974, confrontations with the state by militant workers are no more encouraging. The Broad Left played a leading role but

consciousness remained on the terrain of militancy. There was willingness to strike against the state. The general attitude was one of cynicism rather than desire to replace it: 'Its significance was that it was a first step towards disillusionment with the system of government itself. But it ended as soon as the miners' demands were met. The miners' consciousness did not rise to a consistently higher permanent level' (Allen, 1981: 320-1).

Studying a car factory in the early 1970s, Batstone and his colleagues emphasised diversity among stewards and differences among and between shop floor and office workers in attachment to 'trade union principles'. A quarter of stewards saw 'socialism/workers control' as a major principle; few saw its prosecution as part of their role. The authors concluded: 'the strikes typical of the plant we studied and, indeed, of British industry more generally, can be seen to play only a marginal role in terms of developing class consciousness' (1977: 11-40; 1978: 218)

A survey of the 1980 steel strike found most respondents believed that the experience made them more militant and enhanced confidence to mount industrial action (Hartley et al, 1983: 155-8). The 1984-5 miners' strike provoked imprecise optimism. Sympathetic academics concluded: 'A lot of people say that they've never experienced anything like it. Ever. It has been the major event in their lives. None of them will forget it' (Beynon, 1985:1). SWP members claimed miners had become 'part of a collective that is acting to change the world'; and, more sombrely, 'perhaps these experiences will have a lasting effect on only a minority of those involved once the pressures of everyday life reassert themselves' (Callinicos and Simons, 1985: 251-2). Work on Canada which ranged more widely (Langford, 1994) observed variations in impact arising from prior values and experience, the extent of participation, type of strike, degree of conflict and outcome. Despite changing attitudes during stoppages,

orientations reverted to normality in their aftermath. All we can conclude from these studies, is that through the 'principle of cumulation' (Eldridge, 1968: 157), stoppages, according to their significance and outcome, may confirm or disrupt patterns of industrial relations, moderate or militant, and traditions of trade unionism. In some cases a small number of participants may be won to revolutionary politics. There is little evidence that strikes significantly stimulate revolutionary consciousness.

Kelly (1988) assessed their impact across the period. He employed a three fold structure of consciousness - sectional, corporate and hegemonic. He utilised various indicators, strike numbers and patterns, voting trends, political attitudes, union and party membership. He noted a small growth of hegemonic consciousness based on shifts in union and Labour Party economic strategy, resurgence of far left groups 'on a very limited scale' and 'a limited revival of interest in ideas of workers control'. If this was 'moderately impressive', the influence of the economic and defensive militancy of 1977-9 on hegemonic consciousness was 'extremely meagre' (ibid: 87-90, 91-101, 104-16, 127). Even for 1968-74, this may overstate matters: changes in union and Labour Party policy and interest in workers control can arguably be seen as developments within left reformism augmenting corporate, not hegemonic consciousness.

Kelly was positive about revolutionary periods. He commended Luxemburg's argument that mass strikes, in collision with state repression and in conjunction with a mass party, can develop hegemonic consciousness and comprise a major element in the transition from capitalism (ibid: 34-40, 293-304). We have reviewed the problems with this and precisely how, short of resort to a *deus ex machina*, a reasonably strong pre-existing revolutionary party is to develop. Kelly's hazard that it will emerge from

the next strike wave appears over-optimistic on the basis of experience before and after 1988.

Strikes and Socialists Today

The world Hyman struggled to understand and change has been transformed. Diminished in number, scale and duration, strikes are typically conducted, according to restrictive legislation, by cautious officials rather than strikers themselves. Unions enrol 7 million fewer workers than in 1979. Workplace representatives have lost the power to mobilise independently (Daniels and McIlroy, 2009, Simms and Charlwood, 2010). The risks in revolution demand majority revolutionary consciousness. It is currently chimerical. The response to capitalist crisis confirms no credible revolutionary programme, party, strategy, exists. Trade union consciousness changed, but not through the influence of the left. Remaking the working class, neoliberalism mobilised its individualism. Variably and against resistance, it renewed conceptions of joint interest, individual mobility, cultural freedom; it re-rooted capitalist ethics in the proletarian psyche. It recomposed ways of understanding the world hostile to class struggle, inimical to collectivism (cf Hyman, 1999).

Strikes infrequently figure *in extenso* in industrial relations textbooks. Studies of consciousness providing an ‘index of what has been achieved and what remains to be done’ (Lukács, 1971: 80) are rare. Yet the struggle, whatever its current level, remains a struggle of the working class ‘*against itself*: against the devastating and degrading effects of the capitalist system upon its class consciousness’ (ibid). In that context Hyman’s deductive method, analysing consciousness through inference from evidenced action, remains relevant. So do his conclusions. Socialists support strikes

as instruments of assertion against exploitation and oppression. They threaten capital, exceptionally, capitalism. They remain 'expressions of resistance' and 'intimations of hope'. They may engender militancy or demoralization. They typically foster trade union consciousness because, like stewards, strikes are part of trade unionism. Despite contradictions and variations, the practice of trade unionism, not just its professional players, is a problem for socialists. Trade unionism challenges capital but ultimately accommodates it: bargains are struck, strikes end. Revolutionaries possess resistance but not inoculation to the pressures of organisation, bargaining and strike resolution. As the history of the CP confirms, some succumb. Revolutionary consciousness surrenders to trade union practice.

Conflict and dislocation of routine experience mean strikes may provide favourable conditions for socialists. They raise political questions but do not provide revolutionary answers. As Hyman insisted, these must be fought for on a wider front, in arenas beyond the workplace. If it comes at all, an upsurge capable of creating a powerful revolutionary party, will not emerge from strikes alone. It will develop internationally, from encroaching control, gradual, long-term radicalization across society, in the workplace, the unions and, reinforced by the unions' link with it, the Labour Party. Strikes constitute one sector of struggle.

Economism is always with us. As Hyman came to understand, socialists are not simply trade unionists. We should never collapse the political into the economic. Or be less critical of trade unionism than he was: progress 'can only be gained by the truth and self-criticism must, therefore, be its natural element' (ibid). Nonetheless, given their specific weight, and potential universality as well as the insubstantiability of social movements, we may question the view that unions cannot act as the organizing centre of class struggle – or to avoid syndicalist and economic

implications, *an* important centre. There are few alternatives. The anti-capitalist movement is at an impasse, third wave feminism is hardly a mass movement, and its relationship to socialist change slender, anti-racism and multiculturalism currently hold few positive implications for socialist transformation. Admittedly, unions show few signs of anchoring active alliances with social movements. They remain substantially confined to their traditional realm.

Will things be different in the foreseeable future? Despite economic crisis, the forces to remould hostile environments are largely absent. Nothing is predetermined. Growth of revolutionary consciousness is neither impossible nor fated. Continued capitalist instability and class conflict suggest at some stage we may see resurgence. *Different* unions may assume an important role. In that eventuality Hyman's work on strikes and consciousness will constitute a valuable inheritance. For those of us who have never believed that socialism was easy or inevitable, then, as he remains fond of remarking: *la lotta continua*.

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End Notes

¹ His first publications were *Oxford Workers in the General Strike*. Oxford Centre for Socialist Education 1966 and *sub nom* Bernard Ross, *Know Your Enemy: A Report on the Reports*. Coventry: May Day Manifesto Committee, 1968.

² In Oxford and Coventry Hyman was active around the car factories, selling the IS papers, distributing leaflets, making contacts with stewards and speaking at meetings. He was involved in building an IS branch in Coventry and a Marxist discussion group at the university. He played a continuing role in the Association of University Teachers. His part in the Warwick files affair is documented in Thompson, 1970.

³ Particularly the *ersatz* Leninism of Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League. The criticisms in this paper are comradely and often retrospective. At the time I shared many of the ideas questioned here.

⁴ Hyman adds ‘at least’. A number of members contributed. Cliff ‘then did the final assembly and added his specific spin’. Email to author 14 October 2010.

⁵ For a discussion of Anderson on Gramsci see, Thomas, 2009.

⁶ Lih emphasises Kautsky’s influence on Lenin before 1914, the latter’s attempt to build a party as close to the German model as consonant with underground conditions and his optimistic view that Russian workers were moving, of their own volition, towards revolutionary ideas. He also raises important points of detail. For example, he argues that *tred-iunionism*, usually translated as ‘trade unionism’, refers more precisely to the ideology that demanded that workers should restrict themselves to trade unions (Lih, 2006: xiv and passim). I have addressed the conceptions prevalent in the 1970s explored in Hyman’s work.

⁷ Hyman contributed material to *The Employers’ Offensive* and the group’s journal. His output was not always appreciated in an *ouvriériste* IS. A leading full-timer Duncan Hallas (Fred Hall) described *The Sociology of Trade Unionism* as valuable, ‘its value offset by two serious blemishes’. It was written by an academic for academics. Further it failed to deal with the practicalities of organising strikes. *International Socialism* 1st series, 52, 1972:42. A review of *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* again registered a valuable contribution. It would regrettably ‘find an audience almost entirely amongst a narrow band of “academic Marxists”’, *International Socialism* 1st series 89, 1976: 24.

⁸ In this regard Hyman’s work may be favourably measured against that of Fairbrother. The latter subsequently pushed some of these tendencies to their extreme offering a depoliticized model of rank and file renewal freed from the complications of trade unionism, labourism and the existing labour movement (Gall, 1998, Fairbrother, 2000.)

⁹ Hyman kept in touch with the International Socialist Alliance, ex-members aspiring to keep alive ‘the IS tradition’. It did not survive the 1970s: Hyman papers, Modern Record Centre University of Warwick, MSS 84/14, 84/22. Thereafter his political activism decreased.

¹⁰ He dissociated himself from Eurocommunist critiques of trade unionism and rank and fileism but had little time for the more traditional ‘economistic and manipulative’ approaches of CP shop stewards: Hyman, 1979, 66 n24.

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